

# India: Talibanisation of Sikhism

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The Sikh fundos have distorted out of all recognition the militant order of Khalsa that Guru Gobind Singh instituted in 1699. It is incomprehensible how anyone can project nine years of Khalsa as the raison d'être of Sikhism and give it precedence over 239 years of the history of Sikh Gurus.

THE UGLY spectacle of sword-wielding mobs clashing with the followers of Saccha Sauda — seen by the clerical establishment as heretical — is a mockery of Sikhism on the auspicious occasion of Guru Gobind launching the first Khalsa, on March 30, 1699, at Anandpur Sahib. The real bone of contention this time is not just over religion, but caste, which the Sikh politicians, like other political parties, are lavishly using to strengthen their fundamentalist constituencies. The false pretensions of secularism on which the Shiromani Akali Dal won the February 2007 Punjab Assembly election are exposed by its jumping on the Hindutva bandwagon of the Bharatiya Janata Party. This is a poisonous nexus designed to destroy the secular and multicultural character of Indian civilisation. The instigations have cut across national frontiers, with the Babbar Khalsa vultures waiting to pounce as they watch, sitting on the branches of Taliban trees across the border in Pakistan. The situation recalls the 1978 clashes between the Khalsa and the heterodox Nirankari sect, which unleashed the decade of Khalistan terror.

Recent events are an appalling desecration of the secular and pluralist grassroots culture of Indian civilisation that Guru Nanak promoted. He gave precedence to "duties and devotion" in the conduct of daily life and became a devotee of a god who he refused to delimit by sectarian description. Sikh tradition has it that at the age of 30, Guru Nanak declined to say anything more than repeating: "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim." Nanak believed that faith was a matter of personal belief and he urged Muslims to be true Muslims and Hindus to be true Hindus. His followers included many Hindus and Muslims, simply called Sikhs, meaning disciples (shishya). Guru Nanak preached against caste discrimination and racial prejudice at a time when slavery was customarily practised worldwide. Thousands of people, irrespective of their religion, caste, creed, or sex flocked to pay homage to Guru Nanak when he passed away on September 22, 1539. His tangible shining legacy is the Golden Temple at Amritsar, the foundation stone of which was laid in December 1588 by Hazrat

Mian Mir — an eminent Muslim Sufi saint of Lahore. The sanctum of the shrine is named Harmandir, after Hari (God).

As misfortune would have it, the Sikh and Hindu `fundoos' (a nickname given by the novelist Githa Hariharan) have jumped on the BJP's Hindutva bandwagon to destroy the multicultural and pluralistic magnificence of Indian civilisation. The Sikh fundoos have sidelined Guru Nanak's egalitarian, secular culture and smashed to bits the "Three Pillars of Sikhism" that he erected: meditation, earning an honest living, and sharing with others. The institution of langar — the common community kitchen, which Guru Nanak established to break the discrimination of the caste system — has been undermined as separate gurudwaras have mushroomed in Punjab for lower-caste Sikhs, while higher status elitists frequent exclusive langars where they are not obliged to sit and eat as equals with Dalit Sikhs. Many Sikhs have started flaunting their higher status by adding caste suffixes after their name Singh, a practice strictly prohibited by the Sikh Gurus.

Notwithstanding the media images of Punjab's prosperity, the region has become the ghetto of caste apartheid. As a recent editorial in *The Hindu* points out: "Almost one in three residences of Punjab belongs to the Scheduled Castes — the highest percentage in India — and atrocities against them have been mounting. Ever since the seizure of a shrine at Talhan by upper-caste villagers provoked large-scale rioting, there has been a string of violent attacks on both Sikh and Hindu Dalits. In response, Dalits have increasingly turned from established faiths to new spiritual leaders who articulate their anger. In 2001, Piara Singh Bhainiara set off a small-scale version of the ongoing violence when he released the Bhavsagar Granth, a 2,704 page religious text" extolling the spiritual in the Guru Granth Sahib in Dalit Sikh homes.

The Sikh fundoos have distorted out of all recognition the militant order of Khalsa that Guru Gobind Singh instituted in 1699, barely nine years before his death in 1708. The order was formed during a state of emergency to confront the Mughal army in guerrilla warfare. The ever-ready equipment of the Five Ks was essential for the militants as they moved from place to place under cover of forest. He also broke the feudal stranglehold of the Moghul administration by directly distributing plots of crown land among the Khalsa followers, who comprised both Hindus and Muslims. It was thanks to his Muslim disciples that Guru Gobind Singh was able to escape from the siege of the fort at Anandpur by Mughal and Rajput armies. The rabble-rousing caste fundoos must also know that three of the five Panj Pyaras baptised by Guru Gobind Singh belonged to the lowest of castes.

In fact, following the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the

importance of the purely militant character of the Khalsa organisation diminished. This is evident from Guru Gobind Singh's policy of reconciliation as he joined with Aurangzeb's successor, Bahadur Shah I, to reduce the conflict. An outstanding statesman, poet, and scholar of Persian and Sanskrit, the tenth Guru of the Sikhs never initiated an anti-Muslim crusade. Instead, Guru Gobind Singh followed in the footsteps of his predecessors who had supported Prince Khushro against his father Jahangir in the latter's battle for the throne, and later Dara Shikoh against Aurangzeb. Historical records show that during his journey to Nanded in Maharashtra for discussions with Bahadur Shah, Guru Gobind Singh emphasised Guru Nanak's original ethical tenets over Khalsa militancy. With his enormous popularity, he might well have nominated the eleventh Guru of the Sikhs from among his loyal disciples. Instead, Guru Gobind Singh asked them to accept the Granth Sahib as their guide, which contains compositions by the Gurus as well as traditions and teachings of saints, including Kabir, Namdev, Ravidas, and Sheikh Farid.

The Taliban-inspired decision taken by the Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee to expel clean-shaven Sikh students and those sporting short hair from the schools it runs is astounding, considering that none of the nine Gurus with Hindu names before Guru Gobind Singh was obliged to carry the Five Ks: Kesh (uncut hair), Kanga (comb), Kaccha (short trousers), Kara (steel bangle), and Kirpan (sword). Guru Gobind Singh himself adopted the Five Ks only during the last nine years of his life when he changed his name, Gobind Rai, to Gobind Singh. It is incomprehensible how anyone can project nine years of Khalsa as the *raison d'être* of Sikhism and give it precedence over 239 years of the history of Sikh Gurus. It is as preposterous as giving religion precedence over secular culture and faith over reason.

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\* This is based on the Prologue to Madanjeet Singh's forthcoming book, *Cultures and Vultures*. The author, a former Indian diplomat, the founder of the South Asia Foundation, and a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador, is a Sikh. As a director of the Cultural Sector of UNESCO in the early 1980s, he was in charge of the History of Humanity, a seven-volume compendium conceived by Julian Huxley in 1946.